Christians and Divorce

A Personal Journey, Biblical and Practical Advice

Peter Miles

Copyright © Peter Miles 2019

Unless otherwise indicated Scripture quotations are taken from the New American Standard Bible, Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission. (www.Lockman.org).

Scripture quotations marked (ESV) are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® (ESV), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

ISBN: 978-0-244-03886-1

Christiansanddivorce.com

Contents

Acknowledgements.....5

Introduction.....7

Part 1: A Personal Journey and Reflection.....9

A Journey Through Divorce: Grief, Anger, Depression and Loneliness.....9

Reality Check: The Impact of Divorce.....19

The Best Way.....25

Remarriage?.....31

The Fear of Being Single.....34

For Those Who Have Remarried.....42

Epilogue.....46

Part 2: Is There A Biblical Right To Divorce and Remarry?.....47

Jesus and Paul's Teaching about Marriage and Divorce 48

The Exception for Divorce in Matthew's Gospel.....53

What Does porneia Mean? 64

Divorce for Desertion or Abuse?.....74

Conclusion.....77

Resources 78

Acknowledgements

My sincere thanks to Derek Stancombe, David Fleming, Andrew Cornes and John Staer for their encouragement, constructive criticism and invaluable comments.

Cover photo (credit Andrew Brown): In the aftermath of a Western Australian bush fire new life grows symbolising that out of the trauma of divorce there is hope and life in Jesus Christ.

Introduction

It is probably true to say most people marry with the intention to stay together for life. I never thought I would end up divorced, but did and the statistics tell us that now in the western world about half of all marriages end in divorce. The consequences of divorce are immense, not only for the couple but on their children and family. Divorce is a subject which arouses intense emotions and debate. It is difficult to objectively to talk about and examine the subject of divorce because it carries such a great weight of sorrow, loss, pain, anger, remorse and perhaps guilt. We know this for many of us have a family member or a friend who has been divorced. You may have experienced divorce yourself, as I have. Maybe you are deeply unhappy in your marriage and contemplating divorce as the only way out. Perhaps you are separated but not formally divorced or in fact divorced and remarried.

If you have been divorced, you will know it to be one of the most emotionally traumatic experiences one can endure. It cuts to our heart like no other relational crisis. The emotional pain can be like the death of your spouse and for some it is worse.

If you are not divorced I hope what you read here will encourage you to stay faithful to your marriage despite whatever difficulties you may encounter. Separation may be warranted (as Paul indicates in 1 Corinthians 7:11) where there is serious physical or psychological danger to yourself or your children but I would encourage you to remain faithful, hope for repentance and work for reconciliation (more on abusive situations in Part 2 - Divorce for Desertion or Abuse?). There is much more at stake than our own happiness as I hope to explain. God’s grace, strength and peace are

sufficient even in what may seem a hopeless situation. That I can say from personal experience.

Ten years before our divorce there was, seemingly, an epidemic of divorces within our church family - not for adultery or desertion - but just that the couples had ceased to love one another and then found someone else who they thought was more suitable or loving. The elders of our church hadn't specifically taught on the subject of divorce and remarriage so I undertook a long study on the subject - first from the Bible and then what others had written on the subject. This led me to the understanding expressed in this book. I then found myself in the situation of having to live by what I believed God's word taught me. So what you will read here has been born out of life experience, not just theology. It is in two parts: 1. the personal journey through divorce and 2. a Biblical examination of the question 'Is there a right to divorce and remarry?'

If you are considering divorce, separated or divorced it is my hope that you will gain a deeper perspective and avoid the snares which often accompany divorce so that you might not only avoid or survive divorce but find God's love and peace in greater measure. By God's grace you may even find reconciliation with your husband or wife as I did after an intervening period of many years.

Part 1: A Personal Journey and Reflection

A Journey Through Divorce: Grief, Anger, Depression and Loneliness

Grief

As a Christian, there were many things I might have been prepared for, but divorce was not one of them. When my wife of 27 years left, I was devastated. I found recovery from divorce took time and there is no painless path.

While there were many people and things which helped me through this time - my parents, friends, prayer, reading the Bible and participating in a group course Divorce-Care run by our church, it was God's hand of grace which saw me through.

The emotional stress of separation and divorce is certainly great. In the first few months I felt numb and emotionally totally drained. I experienced waves of emotions - intense grief - like a part of me had died. The thought of losing my wife of 27 years was like she had died also. I felt remorse - of all the things I could have done to have loved her more. I felt anger - why she should leave me after all we'd done and shared together. I had thought our marriage was a good marriage. I felt alone - in a world where it seemed everyone else had a partner. I felt depressed - disinterested in everything normal - work, eating, socialising.

As I found through the divorce support group run by our church, these feelings are normal grief reactions to deep loss. It was a great help to know others had and were experiencing the same emotions as I felt. Just being able to talk and share my own feelings to others

who had been through separation and divorce, relieved much of the emotional burden.

The key, I found, as I experienced these emotions was not to deny or suppress them, but at the same time not to allow their free reign. The need is to recognise, control them and not allow them to control us. If we allow grief to control us we are in danger of falling into a pit of self-pity and be of no use to anyone including ourselves. If we allow anger to take control the outcome can be devastating both for the object of our anger and ourselves. If we allow feelings of loneliness to take hold we may quickly fall into another relationship to fill the void.

So how can such strong, maybe overwhelming feelings be controlled? This is where we need to take a spiritual perspective - for if our faith is in God then ultimately, though what has happened is not good, the outcome is in His hands. There is light at the end of what seems a long dark tunnel.

In this life we can expect to be tested - and no testing is pleasant. Jesus Himself experienced times of testing. Did He respond with what seemed humanly normal and natural? No, Jesus' response was always in line with God's word and will. So when we are tempted to respond to our feelings in unhealthy ways the answer is to check them against God's word. Again we may not feel like doing things God's way but I have found the way to true, godly contentment is not by following your emotions but by humbly seeking God's will and doing what is right according to His word.

Although the loss of your husband or wife through separation or divorce is one of the most painful emotional experiences we need to keep in mind that our relationship with Christ is the most important. We need to be on guard against allowing ourselves to be so overwhelmed by emotion that we lose sight of Him. We may

become angry towards God: "If You are a loving Father why did You allow this to happen to me?" or thoughts of a similar nature. The reality is of course that God did not cause your husband or wife to leave - they did of their own free will - something God never takes away from us. Yet despite the pain we can draw comfort from the knowledge God is with us through our time of grief and loss.

So while you may *feel* God is distant, it certainly is not the reality. He may not prevent our pain but He is with us through it - as He has promised - *I will never leave you nor forsake you.* So in times of crisis our need of Him is greater and through such times we can find ourselves closer to God than before. Yet, as in all relationships, it takes effort and time. The hardest thing I found was *deciding* to do things God's way. Having made that choice God's grace and strength were freely given. I found talking to God, in prayer, from your heart brings a greater sense of His presence and comfort than anything else, especially prayer that begins with praise for what He has done before we express our own needs. We should also confess our own failings in our marriage. Humility is needed here since it is so easy to justify ourselves. Self-righteousness will always be a barrier.

The sense of loss is great. I know how I felt - the grief and powerlessness to regain that loss. As I mentioned earlier, the emotional pain was like a death, and in another sense greater. With the death of a loved one there is grief but there is finality. With divorce finality never seems to come. I remember, when on seeing my wife on family occasions, feeling a taunting grief. She was there, but in another sense she wasn't, just tantalisingly out of reach like the ghost of a loved one that you see and reach out to but then vanishes.

Yet as a child of God, though not spared the pains of this life, I did not feel total despair - for I knew my life was in His hands and He knew this would happen. I can understand why those who have no hope despair to the point of taking their own life. More people suicide over broken relationships than for any other reason. This is why it is absolutely essential in times of great loss that we keep our hope in Christ before our mind. This is where Scripture and spiritual songs can play a crucial role in keeping our spiritual health. Take for instance Jeremiah:

He (God) has driven and brought me into darkness without any light; He turns his hand again and again the whole day long. He has besieged me with bitterness and tribulation; He has walled me about so I cannot escape; He has put heavy chains upon me; though I call and cry for help, He shuts out my prayer; He has blocked my ways with hewn stones, my soul is bereft of peace, I have forgotten what happiness is; so I say, "Gone is my glory, and my expectation from the Lord." (Lamentations 3.2-18, excerpts).

Jeremiah sounded very depressed and in total despair. Yet this is what he goes on to say:

My soul continually thinks of it and is bowed down within me. But this I will call to mind, and therefore have hope: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. "The Lord is my portion," says my soul, therefore I will hope in him. (3.20-24).

Notice Jeremiah does not deny the reality of his circumstances, but calls to his mind the hope he has in God - His steadfast love never ceases, His mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is His faithfulness. He meets my deepest needs. My hope is in Him.

Therefore if we remind ourselves, daily, of these things, even speaking aloud to ourselves the great hope we have, the grief and depression will not overwhelm us.

There are many songs and hymns we can listen to or sing which can help us through times of loss and depression. Maybe make a song of your own. The following hymn has been a great source of comfort and assurance to me:

Be Still My Soul

Be still, my soul: the Lord is on thy side.
Bear patiently the cross of grief or pain.
Leave to your God to order and provide;
In every change, He faithful will remain.
Be still, my soul: your best, your heavenly Friend
Through thorny ways leads to a joyful end.

Be still, my soul: your God will undertake
To guide the future, as He has the past.
Your hope, your confidence let nothing shake;
All now mysterious shall be bright at last.
Be still, my soul: the waves and winds shall know
His voice Who ruled them while He dwelt below.

Be still, my soul: when dearest friends depart,
And all is darkened in the vale of tears,
Then shalt thou better know His love, His heart,
Who comes to soothe thy sorrow and thy fears.
Be still, my soul: thy Jesus can repay
From His own fullness all He takes away.

Be still, my soul: the hour is hastening on
When we shall be forever with the Lord.

When disappointment, grief and fear are gone,
Sorrow forgot, love's purest joys restored.
Be still, my soul: when change and tears are past
All safe and blessed we shall meet at last.

Merely reading these words or singing them will not necessarily change how we feel. It is only as we believe the truths of them in our heart will healing come.

Coping with anger

If we have been the unwilling party to divorce you probably experienced feelings of anger after the initial feelings of grief. You may have felt, as I did, betrayed by the one you have loved. You probably felt a great sense of injustice. Although you may have been a loving and faithful (yet of course not perfect) spouse, you are now abandoned, maybe separated from your children and your home of many years. The vision of marriage and life, growing old together, has been suddenly and traumatically shattered.

Out of this inevitably will develop feelings of anger towards your spouse. Now it is not wrong to feel anger when there has been a true injustice. God shows anger at wrong. Jesus demonstrated anger as a man. However, how we respond to those feelings of anger may be wrong.

We know how destructive the effects of anger out of control can be. We see them daily, on TV and maybe in our own lives. While we might not murder our estranged spouse, morally we may be just as guilty. For even wishing them dead or harbouring hateful thoughts makes us guilty of murder in God's eyes. The apostle John puts it this way:

Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer; and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him. (1 John 3:15).

So with such a solemn warning the need to keep our anger in check is vital. These scriptures are of help:

Be angry and yet do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not give the devil an opportunity. (Ephesians 4.26-27).

For the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God. (James 1:20).

These tell us that: 1. Anger itself is not wrong but what we do with it can be; 2. We should resolve our anger on a daily basis. Don't allow anger to remain and take root in your soul, so giving opportunity for Satan to have his will in you; 3. What might seem to us justice does not necessarily achieve God's standard of what is right. Many a time angry words or a course of action to achieve justice has come to my mind - but invariably they were not God's way! Then I recall to my mind the words *"the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God".*

Other scriptures teach us not to seek vengeance, to pray for those who have hurt us, to return evil with good and to speak graciously of those who have sinned against us rather than maligning them. These all go against our natural inclinations and the wisdom of this world, yet they are the attributes of God's children. I have found praying for those who have done wrong does much to dispel resentment and anger.

However this does not mean we become passive door-mats. Our bodies are a temple of the Holy Spirit and so we should not condone or passively go along with the sinful behaviour of our

spouse. Rather we should actively seek their restoration to God's way in a humble and gentle spirit (this may necessitate getting help and support from your church or Christian friends).

Forgiving our spouse is a part of dealing with our anger. This can be difficult to do if we have been the one wronged. Yet it need not be once we realise what forgiveness means and what it doesn't mean. First forgiveness doesn't mean we condone sin or forget about it. Forgiveness means we will not harbour resentment and thoughts of revenge. It means treating the one who has wronged us as if they hadn't sinned (even though they don't deserve it). It is a decision not a feeling. Forgiving our spouse won't necessarily make their life easier but it will make yours.

Many studies have shown that those who learn to forgive have better health and live longer than those who don't. Yet this is not the most important reason to forgive. When we realise the debt of our own sin before God and how much it cost Him to forgive us in the death of His Son, forgiving those who have wronged us should not be too difficult. As the account of the unforgiving servant in Matthew 18 shows, the debt of our own sin cannot compare to what anyone else may do to us. Keeping this in perspective is essential.

This is not to say they are forgiven by God. That can only happen if they (and we) confess and repent. Yet, for our part, we can forgive, just as God has forgiven us in Christ.

Depression

After grief and anger came depression. The reality of the loss of my wife began to bite deeper. Despite pleadings and tears, assurances of my love, prayer and earnest hope for her return, it all seemed to no avail.

I began to experience intense feelings of sadness which seemed to come in waves often triggered by a song from our early days together. I became uninterested in socialising, eating, routine work and going to church. I found it difficult to handle additional demands on my time or attention. Sleeping was disturbed, often waking in the early hours of the morning unable to regain sleep.

It seemed as if our 27 years together and all we had done were now just faded pages in a history book. So in an attempt to gain some comfort I reminisced of earlier days of our marriage, going over old photos. I also collected music from my past - which seemed to bring a sense of happier times. While these things brought a measure of comfort, it was temporary. Looking back to ‘the good old days’ may be comforting but does not help us face the reality of today and plan for the future.

Overcoming depression takes time and positive effort. The saying "count your blessings" is a start to checking negative thoughts. I'm sure you, as I can, think of many things to thank God for each day. As grievous the loss of our partner may be, we have not lost Jesus, He is with us, loves us and has not forsaken us. Keeping this in perspective is a great help. Yet, this does not mean we can forget about our estranged spouse. Rather we should still hope, love and work for reconciliation.

Keeping active - for example, physical exercise, hobbies, taking on a project, making or renewing friendships, helping others in need are other things which will help us out of depression. The key, though, is taking control of our thoughts. Keep in mind whatever loss we have in this life is not worthy to be compared to the eternal life we will have with Christ (Romans 8:18).

Loneliness

The feeling of loneliness can be intense especially when it seems to us everybody else in the world has a partner. The temptation to find love, value and happiness in the arms of another (and fallible) human being is great. However, while inevitably such will bring immediate relief from the pain of loneliness or rejection, the long term outcome may not be what we hope it would, for statistics tell us second marriages are more likely to end than first marriages and third more so. So in our emotionally vulnerable state we may not think rationally. Therefore I would ask you to consider this: our deepest need is met, not in another human being, but in God through Christ, for He will never forsake us. His love endures forever.

The Bible says a husband and wife are *one flesh.* So when separation and divorce occur, the one flesh is torn apart. They don't become two single individuals again, but two parts of the one. This is why the emotional pain is so great. While each may pursue separate lives and in time the emotional pain subsides, there remains a part of each other in each other. This is why I am convinced marriage is for life - as long as each lives, and why we ought to seek reconciliation or remain willing to be reconciled - even if humanly it may seem impossible.

Reality Check: The Impact of Divorce

The Effect On Children

Divorce has a profound effect on children of all ages. On separate occasions, I had two of my sons (in their early twenties) weep on my shoulder at the prospect their Mum and Dad were no longer going to be together. Whatever age children are when separation and divorce occur, it throws their lives into turmoil. Their world, as they have known it since birth, is suddenly torn apart, and they are powerless to do anything about it.

There have been a number of studies by various researchers on the effect of divorce on children. One landmark study (published 2000) by Judith S. Wallerstein, *"The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce",* studied the lives of 131 children over a period of 25 years. The children who were all under 14 at the time the study began in 1971, and are now in their thirties and forties. The following is an excerpt from a review of Judith Wallerstein's book by family law solicitor David Lutz:

The first important point Professor Wallerstein makes is that the greatest majority of divorces occur within the first nine years of marriage. That being the case, 80% of the children involved are under the age of ten. The third, and very related point she makes, is that the family breakup and subsequent divorce is the single most significant event in a child's life. Based upon the many interviews with these 131 children over a twenty-five year period, she comes to this conclusion: it affects the child's interaction with other family members (of course), school work and friendships, dating, choice of marriage partners, whether or not to have children, choice of employment and relations at work, personality, and generally how children of divorce fare in society.

She says that children of divorce see the world through the fact that at a very early age they lost their family. They see the world very differently than their peers who grew up in intact families. She is able to make this comparison because she had a control group of children whose parents were not divorced who were the friends and neighbours of the 131 children.

Professor Wallerstein concludes that these children have great difficulty in relating to the concept of family, due to the loss of theirs. Because they did not have two biological parents rearing them, everything they had known in daily life to that point changed and, for the most part, changed for the worse.

The book, through examples and statistics, revealed that children of divorce at first blame both parents for the loss of family, regardless of who was at fault. The child is losing that which is familiar and because he or she is usually very young, the child often believes that his or her behaviour caused the dissolution of the family. The child believes this because the parent's problems were not cognizant to the child. Parents, of course, have problems and concerns which a young child could not begin to understand. The child's world when under age ten, is limited to eat, sleep, school, very limited responsibility and, most importantly, play. Someone provides food, clothing, shelter and organised activities. Families do things together even if in some families that time is limited.

When one parent is eliminated from the child's life, the child's whole world changes and the complex reasons for the breakdown are unfathomable. The child only has one image burned into her brain that will colour every personal interaction for the rest of her life: ***my family is gone*** (emphasis mine). Quoted by permission: www.lutz.nb.ca - where you can read other family law articles.

Sober words indeed, and as judges often remind divorcing parents: children are going to be more affected than they are. When Judith Wallerstein began her study the prevailing view was that though divorce was upsetting to children in the short term, in the long-term everyone would be happy. Her study showed how wrong this view was; hence the words in her title ‘The Unexpected Legacy’. A lot more could be said about the negative effect divorce has on children which I need not go into. An Internet search with the words "effect of divorce on children" will show numerous articles and sad statistics.

To those contemplating divorce I would strongly encourage you to take a reality check on the effect divorce will have on your children. Children's lives and future usually take a second place as divorced couples restructure their lives. While we may divorce our spouse and pursue a new life with another mate we don’t in fact become ‘free’ of our first marriage since children are a constant reminder of the ‘one-flesh’ instituted by God. Therefore, in one sense at least, our responsibilities to our first marriage do not cease with divorce. So I would suggest persevering in a marriage for the sake of your children may be more honourable than is popularly advised (but where there is abuse see ‘Divorce for Desertion or Abuse?’). Putting the welfare of others ahead of your own is definitely a Christ-like principle.

It is commonly thought that every child needs a mother and a male parent. Yet studies show that children (and particularly boys) are better off when they have a regular and meaningful relationship with their biological father. Tragically, too often children are separated from their father.

To those who did not want to divorce, this is not intended to add to your stress or guilt. However, while you may not be able to restore the family to what it was, you can reassure your children of this:

you love them and they were born out of love, not conflict. (It is interesting to note, that while parents may divorce their mates, it is unheard of for them to divorce their children). While you would like, as much as they, to be a family again they need to face the fact it may not be. And while we all hope that our father or mother, husband or wife will stay faithful and love us, sin and hardened hearts may dash our hopes and dreams. This is where we can lead our children to (in their own way) put their ultimate hope and trust in God - our Father in heaven who loves us and who will never leave or forsake us. Finally, how you respond to the divorce will play a key factor in your children's future life.

As for the economic effects I need not elaborate, for divorcees are inevitably worse off than married couples.

Trial Separation?

Often when couples experience crisis in their marriage they have, or are encouraged to, 'a trial separation'. This is a huge mistake and makes no more sense than 'a trial divorce'. The object of such a 'trial' is to ease the tension (which it inevitably does) but rarely, if ever, paves the way to reconciliation.

The Effect of Divorce On Other Relationships

The impact of divorce extends beyond the couple and their children to their parents, grandparents and church family who also have to struggle in their relationships with the estranged or divorced couple. Remarriage ushers in new and complex relationships with divided loyalties and responsibilities with the new spouse's children and family. The 'extended' or 'blended' family, as it is now known, is rarely harmonious.

So I hope that what I have written here will help those who are separated, divorced or contemplating divorce to see things in a clearer perspective, avoid the snares that accompany divorce and in particular realise your most important relationship is your relationship with God and with Christ. I hope that wherever possible you might be encouraged to reconcile with your husband or wife for the fundamental reason that we owe nothing to anyone except to love one another (Romans 13:8).

Why Marriages Breakup

I believe that one of the reasons why marriages breakup is because of unrealistic expectations of marriage and our spouse. We often have expectations of our spouse, a sinner saved by grace as we are, to provide those deepest needs that in reality only God can provide. While it is not wrong to have expectations of our spouse it needs to be grounded in the reality that there will be times, perhaps many times, when they fail those expectations. This is not to say we should excuse or just put up with sinful behaviour. First we need to draw on God's love and grace in times of trouble and not make the mistake of seeking or trying to force our spouse to love us. Love cannot be earned or obtained. It can only be given.

Yet all our resolve to love and forgive may not change an unrepentant spouse. This is why in such times we should get help from our church family, from mature Christians who love and are brave enough to confront a sinful spouse. I think one of the appalling failures of the modern church is its reluctance to effectively discipline members who continue in sin for fear of being labelled as unforgiving and legalistic. Yet the Bible clearly teaches that the church is to exercise discipline - for the sake of the sinning member, because the sin, if unchecked, will 'leaven the whole lump' and for the sake of the one offended (where the sin is against another member).

But is a legal divorce the answer to a difficult marriage and remarriage the natural and right way to find a new life and love? Is there a better way?

The Best Way

In the culture of today the very fabric and meaning of marriage has been relegated to a by-gone era. At best it is seen as an option - provided it provides ongoing happiness for both husband and wife. Attitudes to the roles of a husband and wife in a marriage have moved considerably from that outlined in Scripture

What is the God-ordained way for marriage?

The way Jesus taught us to live was based on two simple but profound statements - to love God and to love our neighbour as ourselves (Matthew 22:37-40). We can be distracted by narrowly focusing on the meaning of one word or phrase while overlooking a major principle (which, incidentally, is what Jesus accused the Pharisees of doing). Everything Jesus taught (including marriage, divorce and remarriage) hinged on these two statements and so the whole question of whether there is a right to divorce and remarry must be considered in their light. That is, is divorce and remarriage consistent with what Jesus and the apostles taught about love?

As Paul said:

Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbour has fulfilled the law. For this, "You shall not commit adultery, you shall not murder, you shall not steal, you shall not covet," and if there is any other commandment, it is summed up in this saying, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore love is the fulfilment of the law (Romans 13:8-10).

And I show you a still more excellent way (1 Corinthians 12:31).

In the renowned 'love' passage of 1 Corinthians 13, Paul reveals the characteristics of *agape* love, it being the mark of one born of God.

It is patient, kind, humble, pure, forgiving, bearing, hoping, believing, enduring and never failing.

Can we then say a Christian is free of their responsibility to be faithful, patient, humble, forgiving, bear the load, hope for reconciliation, believe for the good and endure suffering because our spouse has been unfaithful, abused us, deserted and even divorced us? The God type of love, *agape* we are told, always hopes, always endures and never fails.

1. We first should know that marriage is a covenant, not a contract. Marriage is a covenant made between a man and a woman and before God (even for those who don't believe in God). God calls the marriage bond a covenant (Malachi 2:14). Contracts can be broken when one party fails to meet the terms or promises made, but a covenant does not end if one party is unfaithful to those promises.

Nowhere in Scripture will we find an example of where our spouse's sin releases us from the obligation to love and be faithful to our covenant with them. Are we only to love or be faithful as long as our spouse loves and is faithful to us? Jesus said we are to treat others as we want to be treated and to love and do good to those who mistreat us (Luke 6:27-36). The real test of faithfulness comes when things don't go according to plan. At such times we have to make a decision: will I continue to love and remain faithful or not? It is noteworthy that no marriage vows (at least in the Christian community) make love and faithfulness conditional.

While it is natural to want love from others, the onus is always on us to love. Love cannot be obtained. It can only be given. If we are to love our enemies then should we not love and be faithful to an unfaithful spouse? We are told never to repay evil with evil and are to overcome wrong by doing what is right (Romans 12:17 and 21). Therefore how does divorcing (and here I mean a legal divorce, not

just separation) a spouse because of their sin demonstrate love? Could divorce be a form of judgement (or even revenge)? Shouldn't we rather show mercy? As James informs us:

For judgement will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgement (James 2:13).

2. I believe unforgiveness is also one of the major reasons marriages run into crisis because it breeds hardness of heart (but where physical abuse is involved you need to take steps to protect yourself – see Part 2 – Divorce For Desertion or Abuse?). Spouses inevitably sin against each other from time to time and unless we forgive on a daily basis, that unforgiveness will fester and create bitterness which can turn into hostility and finally rejection. I can understand the pain that is experienced at such times but when we see how great is our own sinfulness before God and how great is His forgiveness for us in Christ we can bear and forgive our spouse's sins against us, no matter what they have done. This is not to say sin is condoned for all sin is against God and so there has to be repentance before there is forgiveness before God.

I would suggest another reason marriages run into difficulty and love for a spouse has grown cold, it is because love for God and the love of God within has grown cold first. As Jesus admonished the church at Ephesus "you have left your first love" (Revelation 2:4). Love is not just something we feel but needs to be nurtured in an act of our will.

3. The 'right' to divorce and remarry on the grounds of adultery, desertion or other sinful behaviour establishes the principle that forgiveness and reconciliation are an option rather than a necessity. It goes against the Spirit of Christ who says to forgive seventy times seven if necessary. How long does the wronged partner give opportunity for reconciliation? Some years ago I was told of a Christian man whose wife left him to live with another man. He

divorced her and remarried. Later his first wife's relationship with the other man broke up. She realised her sin and wanted to reconcile with her husband but could not because he had married another woman.

Divorce and remarriage effectively closes the door to reconciliation. For this reason even if we have been unwillingly divorced we must continue to be faithful to our estranged spouse and give opportunity for reconciliation. It may be thought that, yes, I don't have to divorce if there has been adultery or desertion but if it is persistent and unrepentant then it (and a 'right' to remarry) is permissible. The problem with this thought is that a judgement must then be made as to what is persistent and unrepentant and how long to give opportunity. This can be very subjective. Can we know what a sinful spouse will do in the future?

Patience is one of the 16 characteristics of *agape* love (1 Corinthians 13:4-8). God shows His patience towards us '*not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance*' (2 Peter 3:9). Therefore we too should be patient, always be prepared to forgive and when there is repentance, to reconcile. It is not limited by an arbitrary time frame.

4. The prevailing view of divorce and remarriage says the innocent spouse has a right to remarry. But a cold wife could contribute to her husband's temptation to commit adultery. In the same way, an unloving husband may cause his wife to succumb to the affectionate attention of another man. The fact is we all fail in many ways to love our spouse as we should. Therefore, while we may not be guilty of adultery, none of us can say we are truly innocent. As sinners justified by God's grace, do we earn the right to cease loving our partner because they have wronged us? When we divorce and/or remarry we effectively are saying "Because of your sin, you are no longer my husband/wife". Do we have the

right to say that? If God has shown us mercy, shouldn't we show mercy to those who sin against us?

5. In the Old Testament we find the story of Hosea who was told to take back an adulterous wife (Hosea 3:1). Love, faithfulness and forgiveness are shown instead of judgement and rejection. And God Himself at one time divorced Israel because of her unfaithfulness (Jeremiah 3:8) but note how He speaks to His unfaithful wife, Israel:

"*Therefore, behold, I will allure her, bring her into the wilderness and speak kindly to her. Then I will give her her vineyards from there, and the valley of Achor as a door of hope. And she will sing there as in the days of her youth, as in the day when she came up from the land of Egypt*" (Hosea 2:14-15).

Some have argued for the legitimacy of divorce and remarriage because God divorced Israel. Yes, though God did divorce (literally: 'sent away') Israel (as recorded in Jeremiah chapter 3) because of unfaithfulness, He did not seek and 'marry' another nation. God did not break His covenant with Israel despite Israel's unfaithfulness. His purpose in sending her away was redemptive, so she would return to Him. God sought, not a new wife but that His unfaithful wife be renewed.

In Leviticus God says if Israel broke the covenant He would not reject them or break His covenant with them but give them opportunity to return (Leviticus 26:15 and 42-45). This shows us unfaithfulness does not break or end a covenant. His loving intention then was redemptive; to restore His bride and wife, Israel, and His promise to them still remains today (Romans 10:1-2).

How long does love wait? According to God's word love endures all things, hopes all things and is unfailing. That is the standard of love and faithfulness God expects of His people. Is this

unreasonable? I don't believe anything God asks of us is unreasonable. Difficult or hard to our own desires maybe, but not impossible. In fact I would suggest it is the way of life God expects of His children because He has demonstrated that love and faithfulness to us: through Israel and through offering His own Son (Romans 5:8).

Scripture encourages us to love and patiently endure suffering, as Christ did (1 Peter 2:19-23). Nor should we think we have to do this in our own strength for if we have been born again, of God, we have His divine nature in us and by that we are able to demonstrate His love (1 John 4:19, 2 Peter 1:3-4). God will not ask of us what we cannot do.

Is it not more blessed to give than to receive, to give love than receive love, to show mercy than receive mercy and to give forgiveness than receive forgiveness? And I would say too there is more joy in giving these things than in receiving them. That I can say from personal experience.

While we may not be able to love an estranged spouse in the way we have done, we can be faithful (see also 'Epilogue' for some practical ways we can build and maintain bridges). Furthermore, we can and ought to pray for them. What is impossible for us is possible for God.

Our continued faithfulness in prayer and practical ways are an expression of true love, the God type of love. In fact I would say the foundational principle of marriage is *faithfulness* (as the traditional marriage vows state). Too many think that if the *feelings* of love are gone the basis for marriage no longer exists. Yet it is on the foundation of faithfulness true love and the feelings of love grow. Faithfulness is based on the promise we made and sometimes that will be tested: will we continue to be faithful when it seems all hope is lost and that promise is in vain?

Remarriage?

But what do you do, if after having offered forgiveness and the opportunity to reconcile, your spouse continues to reject you? And if they divorce you and remarry, as inevitably happens, what should you do? As mentioned previously, if you are separated but not divorced, get help from mature Christians. If their counsel to reconcile is rejected by our spouse then we may have to face the possibility of being single. Being single is not necessarily a disaster to be avoided at all costs. This I will cover in more depth later. But some may ask: "Can I remarry?" or just assume it is a 'right'.

The question of remarriage inevitably arises at some time after divorce. The need to love and be loved is a very human and understandable thing. Few things in this life bring us as much joy as when we marry – and few things bring us as much pain as when we divorce. Therefore the subject of divorce and remarriage is a highly emotive one. We all know of someone, even ourselves, who have been divorced and may want to justify why we or someone else should be able to remarry – all in the name of compassion and natural justice. Yet we need to objectively and dispassionately (as difficult that may be) consider what God's word says in resolving this question. It is His word that ultimately must be our guide not our sense of what seems just. As David says:

Establish my footsteps in Your word, And do not let any iniquity have dominion over me (Psalm 119:133).

Whatever scripture teaches us, we need to begin with the confident trust that God's intention is always for our ultimate good and that He will give us the grace and strength to do His will. We will only

find true happiness and fulfilment when we make God's kingdom and righteousness our priority (Matthew 5:3-12).

Jesus' words: "*What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate*" (Mark 10:9) were a clear command not to divorce. As Jesus said "*If you love Me, you will keep My commandments*" (John 14:15). While we may marry in a church it is not the pastor or clergy who marries us. It is God who joins a man and a woman. Therefore for this reason man should not separate what God has made one.

So when thoughts of marriage to another arise we should ask ourselves honestly: do we love enough to *not* marry if by doing so we make them participants in adultery?

I am convinced the Bible was never meant to be an enigma, especially in an area as important as marriage. Spiritual understanding is not the exclusive property of those we consider wise or learned. The Truth of God's word is revealed to all, through the Holy Spirit, who approach with a humble and obedient heart. As the apostle John says:

And as for you, the anointing which you received from Him abides in you, and you have no need for anyone to teach you; but as His anointing teaches you about all things, and is true and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, you abide in Him. (1 John 2:27).

This is not to suggest we shouldn't consider and learn from the teaching of others. It is healthy also to listen to those who have a different or opposing view. The essential thing is spiritual truth is revealed to a spiritual mindset, through the Scriptures and by the Holy Spirit. Others views and teaching will either confirm or contradict the Scriptures and the Spirit's inner revelation.

Christians and Divorce

My appeal first and foremost is for love and faithfulness to prevail but this will have personal cost. If you believe there is a 'right' to divorce and remarry (see Part 2 'Is There a Biblical Right to Divorce and Remarry?') I would ask this: Is this 'right' consistent with what Jesus taught about love? Is it consistent with the foundational command to love your neighbour as yourself (Romans 13:9-10)?

It may be asked "But how I can I love someone who has left me?" As said previously, while we might not be able to love them in the way we have done, we can love them through being faithful and keeping the promise we made when we first married. Just as being faithful to Jesus in a time of persecution will have a deep personal cost (even our life), so will remaining faithful to an estranged spouse.

Some may say also: "But don't I have a right to be happy?" This seems a reasonable expectation but has two flaws. The first is that true happiness (blessedness) is a gift from God as we live according to His way (Matthew 5:1-11). When we try to pursue and obtain happiness on our terms it inevitably eludes us. Secondly, our 'right' can never be at the cost of compromising the truth and our responsibility to be faithful and love as revealed in the Bible.

Yet the fear of a life of singleness may test that love and faithfulness severely - as I experienced, but those fears are not as great as we may think.

The Fear of Being Single

The prospect of a single life, especially if you are still relatively young, may seem for some a burden too great to bear. Jesus' teaching that divorce and remarriage is adultery (with one exception) is to many hard and uncompassionate. Yet we must face His words humbly, honestly and bravely, counting the cost of obeying and following Him. We must be confident in our heart that His way is ultimately for our good though temporarily painful.

Is a deserted or divorced spouse expected to remain single and 'doomed' to a life of loneliness and heartache as some say to justify remarriage? Such fears are understandable but we need to keep in mind God is our ultimate refuge and source of comfort. We may even be encouraged by well-meaning Christians who, wanting to alleviate our pain, see our greatest need is to be remarried. But it is God's word which must be our guide.

When my wife left the thought of possibly remaining single for the rest of my life petrified me. Yet by God's grace those fears gradually subsided. We live in a couple orientated world which views singleness as a temporary or abnormal condition to be avoided at all costs. We are led to believe that to be single is to be incomplete. Yet scripture encourages those who are single or have become single to remain in that state for in Christ we are made complete. Singleness is not seen as a lesser state but even, according to Jesus and Paul, as the preferred state (Matthew 19:10-12 and 1 Corinthians 7:25-40).

Consider these questions:

Does the Bible *clearly* allow remarriage after divorce in certain circumstances? (This question will be considered in Part 2).

We need to first understand what is at stake in upholding the covenant of marriage (for that is what it is). When we made the commitment to marry it was an unconditional commitment (even though we may not have fully appreciated that fact at the time). It is a promise, a vow, which God expects us to keep just as He is a covenant keeping God. No marriage vows include a phrase to the effect: "I will remain faithful to you as long as you remain faithful to me" or "I will love you as long as you love me." Love expressed in faithfulness is the foundational principle of marriage, not our personal happiness.

Marriage is said to be an earthly type of the heavenly relationship: between God and Israel and between Christ and the Church (Ephesians 5:31, 32). God's relationship and promise to Israel still stands. Though He divorced her at one time He did not take another nation (Jeremiah 3:8). And also with us, as members of the Church, His future bride, He remains faithful even if we are not (2 Timothy 2:13).

Do I *have* to remarry?

Of course the answer to this question is no. We may have had no choice in divorce but we do in remarriage - we remarry because we want to.

Is there encouragement in the Bible to be or remain single should I find myself single?

While marriage is portrayed in the Bible as a covenant of much honour we are given many examples in Scripture of encouragement to be or remain single.

Jesus in His teaching about divorce and remarriage said this to His disciples:

The disciples said to him, "If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry." But he said to them, "Not everyone can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given. For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let the one who is able to receive this receive it" (Matthew 19:10-12 ESV).

Here Jesus gives us the possibility of being or remaining single for the sake of the kingdom of God. While we may have become single unwillingly as a result of divorce we should see that God's grace and strength to remain single can be ours also.

Paul also encourages those who are, or have become single, to remain so:

Yet I wish that all men were even as I myself am. However, each man has his own gift from God, one in this manner, and another in that. But I say to the unmarried and to widows that it is good for them if they remain even as I. But if they do not have self-control, let them marry; for it is better to marry than to burn (with passion) (1 Corinthians 7:7-9).

Here Paul encourages those who are single (those who have never married) and widows to remain unmarried. Some have suggested the 'unmarried' also refers to the divorced but Paul goes on to say a woman who has been separated from her husband to remain unmarried (verse 11).

And again he encourages singleness:

Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be released. Are you released from a wife? Do not seek a wife (1 Corinthians 7:27).

So we at least ought to see that singleness is not impossible or a disaster but a real possibility in God's purpose and grace.

Two false ideas permeate modern society: 1. our identity is tied to sexual orientation and 2. a sexual relationship is necessary to be a fulfilled person. We are first and foremost man and woman, created in the image of God. Our sexuality does not determine who we are in God's eyes. Jesus never married or had an intimate relationship with a woman, yet He was the most complete and fulfilled person to have lived in this world.

The world tells us that one must be either a sexually active heterosexual or a sexually active homosexual to be complete. This is a lie. For a Christian true completeness is found in Christ. If we make a sexual relationship a necessity to be fulfilled as a person we are effectively making it an idol. So whether we have same sex or opposite sex temptations, we are told to resist them and by God's grace we can (1 Corinthians 10:13). Human love lasts for a moment but God's for eternity. That is our choice.

We may find ourselves effectively single for reasons other than divorce. For example when our spouse is imprisoned (and this is happening more and more in persecuted Christian communities around the world). Another circumstance may be if our spouse becomes seriously ill and has to be hospitalised or moved to a nursing home. The expectation in both cases is that the remaining spouse be faithful to their marriage though it may mean a long time (or even a life-time) apart with consequent hardship. The same should apply if we find ourselves single as a result of divorce. We may have had no choice where a partner has left us, but we do have a choice to remarry or not.

Is God's grace, comfort and love sufficient for me?

Our greatest need is to know God's grace, comfort and love which are pure and eternal. Human love is inevitably imperfect and temporary.

In support of remarriage after divorce it is often argued a spouse who has been unjustifiably divorced should not be expected to remain single while their former partner is alive. To our human nature, remarriage seems a just and compassionate outcome. But what is kinder: to tell the truth which may be temporarily painful or to tell a comforting untruth? What seems just to us is not necessarily God's way:

For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways," declares the LORD. "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways And My thoughts than your thoughts (Isaiah 55:8-9).

Our guide must ultimately be God's word for even our sense of justice can be corrupted by sin because we are by nature self-centred, not God-centred. The Bible in many places reveals God's laws which to our humanness seem hard and unjust. We might well learn from Job who suffered greatly. Though we in retrospect know why he suffered, Job didn't and God did not tell him. Job complained of his suffering and apparent injustice but in the end he confessed before God "*I did not understand...I did not know...I retract and I repent in dust and ashes*" (Job 42:1-6). So we ought to also have the same attitude when we face or have to endure the injustice of divorce. We may have to come to a decision: to trust God even though we don't fully understand His ways. Who or what will we trust: God or our own wisdom? As the Proverb says:

Trust in the LORD with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding (Proverbs 3:5).

Divorcees desperately need loving and wise support, not necessarily sanction to marry another. Suffering for the sake of righteousness is something we cannot always avoid in this world. In fact it may well be the price we have to pay to be faithful and obedient to the teachings of Jesus. If we become single through divorce and claim to belong to Christ, His future bride, heirs of the Kingdom and eternal glory, how can we say we are doomed?

We Need To Be Prepared For Trials and Suffering

Jesus never promised that our life here would be without trial or suffering. On the contrary, we should expect it- because it is through such trials that our character is refined, as by fire, to be like that of Christ (1 Peter 4:12-13). We may feel betrayal and injustice at the actions of our mate. Jesus also suffered betrayal and injustice at the hands of sinners, yet never said a word or took action against them. Our attitude ought to be that of our Lord.

In this life we are forewarned and told to be prepared for suffering, especially where that suffering is unjust. As the apostle Peter reminds us:

For this finds favour, if for the sake of conscience toward God a person bears up under sorrows when suffering unjustly. For what credit is there if, when you sin and are harshly treated, you endure it with patience? But if when you do what is right and suffer for it you patiently endure it, this finds favour with God. For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps, who committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in His mouth and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously (1 Peter 2:19-23).

Therefore we can expect to suffer for the sake of righteousness if we choose to follow Jesus and live as He taught us.

Yet despite suffering we can know God's peace and the comfort of the Holy Spirit as we pray, give thanks (Philippians 4:6-7) and place our cares and needs into His hand (1 Peter 5:6-7). This may be difficult, but it is a choice we can make. Giving thanks when things are going well is natural but to give thanks to God when life is difficult, requires faith and the strength of Christ's Spirit in us. I am not saying we give thanks for what is wrong but to think upon and give thanks for the many good things God has done especially our forgiveness and salvation in Christ.

Make God your refuge and strength. Many times in the Psalms we are urged to make God our refuge when in times of trial and difficulty. His grace and power will enable us to not only endure troubled times but come through them stronger.

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble (Psalm 46:1)

Trust in Him at all times, O people; Pour out your heart before Him; God is a refuge for us (Psalm 62:8).

Keep Eternity In View

When we have eternity in view it is plain that the marriage relationship here, while shadowing the eternal relationship between Christ and His church, is temporary. It is our relationship with Christ and the members of His body - other Christians - that will last for eternity. Therefore while we may feel aggrieved at becoming single, it is our relationship with Christ that matters most and therefore it is Him we must ultimately please - not ourselves.

Christians and Divorce

Is a divorced partner bound to experience a life of heartache and loneliness? No! On the contrary he is free! Free to love, free to serve, free to be a son of God and free to demonstrate the God-kind of faithfulness in an unfaithful world.

Make God your delight and sufficiency. Keep constantly in mind how great is God's forgiveness, grace and love is towards you and the eternal joy that is promised. So if you find yourself single believe God's grace will be sufficient and that His love will sustain you. See singleness, not as a problem, but a new opportunity in God's purpose for you.

(I would also highly recommend John Piper's truthful and compassionate teaching on singleness on his Desiring God website: https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/single-in-christ)

For Those Who Have Remarried

For those who have remarried, what should you do? Before I try to answer this question I want to say this has been the most difficult section to write, for I know of many who have been unwillingly divorced or had unfaithful and abusive spouses and I do not want to add to their guilt or pain. Nevertheless I believe scripture clearly teaches remarriage after divorce is wrong. Whether we believed we had justification or not to divorce, remarriage, according to Jesus, is adultery. For the one unwillingly divorced, though you had no intention to commit wrong, by remarrying became party to adultery. Understandably this can be hard to accept if we are the ones who have been wronged.

What about those who were divorced and remarried before they became Christians? Scripture doesn't specifically address this and inevitably there would have been some who been divorced and remarried as unbelievers when Paul wrote his letters to the young Gentile churches. Therefore we must be guided by what is said in Scripture, not by what is not. Though we may have been ignorant of God's laws, once we know the truth we become accountable. But God, in His grace, freely forgives those who repent. However those who know the truth but justify their sin is a most serious matter. The consequences of wilful sin are grave, as it will incur God's judgement (Hebrews 10:26-31).

Many marriage beds these days are defiled - whether it is through fornication (pre-marital sex) or adultery (through divorce and remarriage). In this respect many of us have fallen short of God's righteousness (Hebrews 13:4). Yet all sin (except blasphemy against the Holy Spirit) is forgivable where there is confession and genuine repentance. That is God's grace. Repentance, however, will

have a personal cost and we need to do whatever the Holy Spirit tells us to obtain a good conscience.

What will repentance specifically mean? It must mean in the first instance a change of mind: "I was wrong to divorce and remarry". Some, believing remarriage is ongoing adultery, have separated. Others have, for the sake of their children, remained living together but as brother and sister, that is ceasing sexual relations. Still others, while realising their remarriage was wrong, never the less believed they should honour their present marriage. Circumstances will differ enormously but circumstances or what other people do cannot be our guide. We must be guided by what we know of Scripture and the Holy Spirit. Therefore I do not make judgement on those who have remarried, for only God knows the intentions of our heart and it is before Christ that we must give account.

Never the less, I would emphasise the need to have a good conscience and by it know God's peace.

For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart (Hebrews 4:12).

But this we can say for certain: We must stop divorcing and remarrying. Repentance will mean making a genuine apology, asking for forgiveness from the previous spouse and children. It will mean, where necessary, making provision for a previous wife if they have not remarried. Pastors and clergy who conduct marriages need to teach the true nature of the covenant of marriage and the unconditional vow of faithfulness until death without fear of man's censure. Some may understandably have to make a difficult and probably unpopular decision when a couple (one or both who have been divorced) want to remarry.

This raises the serious issue of church discipline where Christians divorce and remarry in blatant disobedience to Jesus' teaching on marriage. Although scripture gives clear guidelines of when and how to exercise discipline within the church, it is rarely practised. Ronald J. Sider in his book '*The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience*' (p 92, Baker Books 2005) said:

'*in one congregation I know in my evangelical denomination, a man and a woman from two different married couples had an affair, divorced their spouses, married each other, and assumed they could continue in good standing in the congregation in spite of their defiance of Jesus's teaching and the destruction of two families. Not even in this blatant case of stark disobedience could this evangelical congregation muster the courage to exercise church discipline*.'

It seems that in the name of being 'loving and forgiving' discipline is not being carried out even when it is clearly justified. This is a tragic error and only serves to increase sin - leaven (1 Corinthians 5:7) - and weaken our resolve to be a 'holy people' before God. It is His honour and word that is ultimately at stake. The goal of discipline is to restore a sinning member. It is not about censure or punishment. As Paul encourages the church in Galatia:

> *Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted* (Galatians 6:1).

Therefore when there is genuine repentance and forsaking of the sin we ought to be ready to love and forgive. That shows true (agape) love.

So we must be guided foremost by love for God (shown in obeying His laws) and then by the principles of love - both for our previous and existing spouse (and our children).

One of the basic requirements of being a disciple of Jesus is to deny ourselves if we are to follow Him. In the short term, yes, it can be difficult – but not impossible for in Christ we are given the power and strength to do his will, as Paul encourages us:

*For this reason also, since the day we heard of it, we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you will walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for the attaining of all steadfastness and patience; joyously giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in Light. For He rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sin*s (Colossians 1:9-14).

When we choose to do what is right there will be a personal cost but in the end we will experience that inner peace and joy that all the comforts of life in this world cannot surpass. It is in times of trial that God wants us to draw closer to Him, to draw on his power and strength so the life of His Son will be formed in us. Until we fully trust Him in such times we may not know His grace and provision.

Epilogue

At the time of writing it has been 19 years since my wife and I were divorced. The early years were particularly difficult but with God's grace we have in most respects reconciled and formed a close and enduring friendship. Neither of us have remarried.

This has been a true blessing - especially for our 4 sons, their wives and now 9 grandchildren. Having witnessed the trials extended families bring, I am truly thankful that we have not had to endure such.

Had I not been convinced of the permanence of marriage and taken the advice of some that I had the 'right' to remarry and 'move on', it would probably be a different story.

So to those who are separated or divorced I would encourage you to do all you can to maintain and build your relationship with your 'ex'. Remember their birthday, include them in your Christmas gifts, help them when they need help, keep family occasions such as your children's (and grand-children's) birthdays and most importantly never deride or put them down but always speak graciously of them.

It is still my hope that one day, in God's plan, we will be reunited as husband and wife and to God will be the glory.

Part 2: Is There A Biblical Right To Divorce and Remarry?

I believe (and many others also) the widely held view that divorce and remarriage are permissible for sexual sin or desertion is not consistent with the whole of God's word as revealed in the Scriptures. Of necessity this subject will need to be considered at some depth because, superficially, the prevailing view seems convincing.

God's design for marriage is very simple at the natural level but profound at the spiritual level. Jesus taught His followers that marriage is a life-long union broken only by death and divorce causes adultery. He did give one exception to divorce and therefore we need to know what it refers to. This exception, found only in Matthew's gospel, has been for many Christians the basis to justify divorce and remarriage.

However it is my conviction that this exception has been taken out of context and wrongly interpreted. We cannot afford to get wrong what God has designed in marriage: the earthly type of the heavenly relationship between Christ and His Bride - the Church. So I hope you will bear with me as we examine what the Bible teaches about marriage, divorce and remarriage.

Jesus and Paul's Teaching about Marriage and Divorce

Where do we begin? It may be tempting to go straight to those passages which seem to indicate a right to divorce and remarry in certain circumstances. This approach is not wise since it is the whole of God's word which must be considered in deciding what is right. It may also be tempting to accept the view of a trusted teacher, writer or Bible scholar. Again the problem is we may tend to accept the one which we feel is more in line with our desires and put aside the one which is not. Further, when the 'experts' can't agree, how can we possibly know who and what is right?

It is a good principle to begin with what is clear before examining what is less clear and to understand the rule before any apparent exception to that rule.

Marriage Is a Life-long Covenant

The Bible teaches marriage is a consensual, life-long covenant relationship between a man and a woman. Jesus expressed it this way:

Pharisees came to Him, testing Him, and saying, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause at all?" And He answered and said, "Have you not read, that He who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh?' Consequently they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together let no man separate." They said to Him, "Why then did Moses command to give her a certificate of divorce and send her away?"

Christians and Divorce

He said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart Moses permitted you to divorce your wives; but from the beginning it has not been this way" (Matthew 19:3-8).

This conversation is also recorded in Mark's gospel (Mark 10:2-9). Jesus' answer to the Pharisees showed God's created plan for marriage was a life-long, monogamous union. Divorce (and the right to subsequently remarry) was wrong because it went against the one-flesh relationship which God created. Divorce was permitted by Moses under the Old Covenant because of hardness of heart. The law never commanded divorce but rather regulated an already existing practice (Deuteronomy 24:1-4). Under the Law of Moses a woman who had been twice divorced or divorced and widowed could not remarry her first husband.

Nowhere in scripture (Old or New Testaments) will you find a God given command or expressed approval to divorce (meaning to terminate a consummated marriage and end all marital obligations). Jesus said *"Because of your hardness of heart Moses permitted you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it has not been this way."* Jesus reiterated that divorce was a man-made practice because of sin and hardness of heart. The Mosaic regulation was to address 'hardness of heart', not sanction divorce. God's intention from creation was for husband and wife be joined as one flesh for life.

Similarly, Paul, in his letters to the early churches affirmed the life-long union of marriage:

For the married woman is bound by law to her husband while he is living; but if her husband dies, she is released from the law concerning the husband. (Romans 7:2).

A wife is bound as long as her husband lives; but if her husband is dead, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord. (1 Corinthians 7:39).

These two scriptures are the only ones in the New Testament which clearly speak of marriage ending: at death.

Paul (and he states it is the Lord's command) says a husband is not to divorce his wife and a wife is not to separate from her husband (but if she does she must remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband) (1 Corinthians 7:10-16).

In summary these scriptures teach us:

1. Marriage was created by God to be a life-long union between a man and woman, broken only by death.

2. It is a union which is not to be broken through the legal, man-made process of divorce.

3. While divorce was permitted by Moses under the Law, because of the hardness of man's heart, it was never sanctioned by God. In God's kingdom, for Christians under the new covenant, there is no concession to sin and hardness of heart.

Divorce Causes Adultery

Jesus then taught that divorce caused adultery:

But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except for the reason of unchastity (Greek: *porneia*)*, makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery* (Matthew 5:32).

Christians and Divorce

And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality (Gk: *porneia*)*, and marries another woman commits adultery* (Matthew 19:9).

Whoever divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her and if she herself divorces her husband and marries another man, she is committing adultery (Mark 10:11-12).

Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries one who is divorced from a husband commits adultery (Luke 16:18).

In summary (the exception of Matthew aside) these scriptures teach us:

1. A man who divorces his wife causes her to commit adultery. This indicates that divorce does not end a marriage and so the inevitable remarriage by a former wife is adulterous. Yet we need to note that the responsibility for the sin of adultery is placed upon the divorcing husband, not the wife.

2. A man or a woman who divorces their spouse and remarries commits adultery.

3. A man who marries a divorced woman also commits adultery, regardless of her guilt or innocence. Paul also confirms that to marry another while the former spouse is still alive is to commit adultery (Romans 7:3).

It is difficult to interpret these plain teachings of Jesus any other way. Divorce causes adultery. Remarriage after divorce is adultery and marriage to a divorced woman is adultery. Marriage does not end with divorce as is commonly thought and understandably it is hard for some of us to accept. That these teachings of Jesus (and

Paul) at face value seem hard or difficult comes as no surprise for that was the reaction of His hearers when He gave them. First the Pharisees and then His own disciples questioned Him.

The disciples' statement "If the relationship of the man with his wife is like this, it is better not to marry" suggests they understood Jesus' teaching on the binding nature of marriage to be far more restrictive than what they knew, that of the Pharisees and the teaching of either Hillel or Shammai (the leading rabbis of that time).

However there is one apparent exception to the rule that divorce and remarriage causes adultery. That is the subject of the next chapter.

The Exception for Divorce in Matthew's Gospel

Matthew records an exception to Jesus' teaching that divorce caused adultery (Matthew 5:32 and 19:9). It is this exception which has generated almost endless debate and in the eyes of many been the basis of the right to divorce and remarry for a number of centuries. But does a long tradition necessarily make it right? This divorce tradition rests on four assumptions:

1. It assumes the exception is universal, applying to all peoples of all ages. However the exception, where a wife has committed fornication or unchastity (Greek: *porneia*), is unique to Matthew. Mark (who records the same conversation with the Pharisees) does not include it and neither do Luke and Paul. Do we assume, as some suggest, that Mark, Luke and Paul knew of the exception but saw no need to include it? We need to be very cautious in assuming anything in God's word, lest we become guilty of adding to it. As the Proverb says:

Do not add to His words Or He will reprove you, and you will be proved a liar (Proverbs 30:6).

2. It assumes that divorce, if justified, ends the marriage covenant, all obligations of each spouse for each other and gives freedom to marry another.

3. It assumes the right to divorce, based on Matthew's account, applies to both men and women. Yet the exception is only given for a man divorcing his wife not a woman her husband. Again, to assume such without fully understanding the context and what the exception refers to, may lead us to error.

4. It assumes the grounds for divorce, fornication, (from the Greek word *porneia*) means sexual sin in general. It is said to include adultery, fornication, homosexuality, incest and indulging in pornography. However as I hope to show later, *porneia*, as it is used in the New Testament in the context of a man-woman relationship, does not mean sexual sin in general and certainly not adultery.

Is it right to make these four assumptions, based on two verses in Matthew, when the plain teaching elsewhere in the New Testament is that divorce and remarriage (while the former spouse is living) is adultery? Again, I would say it is a serious matter to assume anything of God's word, and especially with regard to marriage which is a type of the relationship between Christ and His Church.

To understand why this exception is unique to Matthew we first need to consider what is unique about his gospel and how that is relevant to the exception.

The unique features of Matthew's gospel and their significance.

1. There are more Old Testament quotations in Matthew than in the other Gospels.

2. There are many expressions unique to Matthew, for example:

Don't think that I have come to abolish the Law and the prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfil for truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished (Matthew 5:17-18).

Comment: It needs to be noted that when Jesus spoke these words the Law of Moses was still in force. Jesus, during His time of

ministry, revealed the laws of the coming Kingdom of God and the New Covenant. Yet, at the same time, He could not and would not say anything to contradict the Law (of Moses) while it was still in place. Therefore, it is in the context of the Law of Moses these words should be understood. Not until Christ died on the cross was all accomplished and the Law of Moses, the Old Covenant done away with.

Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of Heaven (Matthew 5:20).

Comment: Jesus was teaching a standard of righteousness for His followers that went beyond conformity to the Law of Moses as taught by the scribes and Pharisees. They emphasised minor aspects of the Law while neglecting the more important.

Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering (Matthew 5:23).

Comment: This clearly applied to temple offerings made under the Law of Moses. Under the new covenant after Jesus' death the earthly temple altar had no significance, for Christ Himself became the offering for sin.

These twelve Jesus sent out after instructing them: "Do not go in the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter any city of the Samaritans" (Matthew 10:5).

Comment: Again, clearly an instruction which is no longer valid, but only applied until Jesus died and rose again.

If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector (Matthew 18:17).

Comment: An instruction which was relevant to Jewish believers at that time. While we can make a spiritual principle of this for today, the terminology Jesus used clearly was meant for that time.

Woe to you, blind guides, who say, 'Whoever swears by the temple, that is nothing; but whoever swears by the gold of the temple is obligated.' (Matthew 23:16).

Comment: Again such an instruction was only relevant to Jews, under the Law, while the temple stood.

3. In Jesus' teaching in what is known as 'The Sermon on the Mount', six times he corrects the teaching of the scribes and Pharisees by saying *"You have heard that it was said...."* and ending with *"but I, I say to you...."* (Matthew 5:21-43). In each case Jesus gave the new standard of righteousness of the kingdom of God that went beyond the letter of the Law of Moses as taught by the Pharisees.

From these passages it should be seen Matthew has recorded the words of Jesus as they were directed to the Jews of His day. Jesus taught the true righteousness of God and corrected the false interpretations by the scribes and Pharisees. Yet such unique expressions as those above would only had relevance to Jewish hearers still living under the Law, the Old Covenant. Therefore for this reason, the unique exception given by Jesus for divorce should also be understood in the context of the Law of Moses.

Luke also recorded Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount (Luke 6:20-49) but it is significant that in his account he made no

reference to the Law of Moses. This again indicates Matthew was written for Jews acquainted with the Law.

Jesus' Teaching about Divorce and Remarriage

Jesus' teaching on divorce and remarriage began with the words:

You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.' (Matthew 5:27-28).

Here Jesus expounded the seventh commandment by saying adultery was committed not only when a man had sex with a married woman (other than his wife), but also when he looked lustfully at another man's wife and also (contrary to popular belief) as a consequence of divorce (Matthew 5:28; 5:32). This showed that adultery is not just the act of intercourse with another man's wife, but the unfaithfulness of heart which *precedes* the act.

These are Jesus' words as recorded by Matthew:

It was said, 'Whoever sends his wife away, let him give her a certificate of divorce' but I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except for the reason of unchastity (Gk: porneia), *makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.* (Matthew 5:31, 32).

They said to Him, "Why then did Moses command to give her a certificate of divorce and send her away?" He said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart Moses permitted you to divorce your wives; but from the beginning it has not been this way. And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality (Gk:

porneia), *and marries another woman commits adultery"* (Matthew 19:7-9).

Jesus corrected the Jews misunderstanding of the Law. The Pharisees claimed the Law *commanded* divorce, but this was not the case. Moses *permitted* divorce because of their hardness of heart but it was never God's original intention. He then said if a man divorces his wife for any reason, other than *porneia*, and marries another he commits adultery. The Law didn't command divorce and divorce did not break a consummated marriage as was commonly believed. Therefore a subsequent remarriage constituted adultery, which was totally at odds with the prevailing view of that time.

Jesus made one exception to the rule that divorce followed by remarriage was adultery. That was if the man's wife had committed *porneia* (the Greek word translated as 'unchastity' and 'immorality' in these two verses) prior to the divorce. But what does this exception for *porneia* refer to?

Again, I don't believe it is meant to be a mystery. Scripture does provide the answer if we are prepared to accept it. There are two ways of understanding the exception: first from the relevant passages of the Old Testament law and secondly from the meaning of *porneia* as it is used in the New Testament. The meaning of *porneia* from other sources will also be examined.

First, to what law were the Pharisees referring to when they said Moses commanded a man to give his wife a *certificate of divorce and send her away*? In Deuteronomy we read:

When a man takes a wife and marries her, and it happens that she finds no favour in his eyes because he has found some indecency in

her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out from his house (Deuteronomy 24:1).

Reading the rest of this passage it is important to note what it does *not* say. It did not command or prohibit divorce but regulated an *already existing* practice. It says a divorced and remarried or divorced and widowed woman *cannot* return to her first husband. Yet it did not prohibit divorce where *some indecency* had been found in her. The Hebrew term here is literally *a thing of nakedness* and is of a sexual nature. What can this refer to? Again, Scripture gives us an answer. Earlier in Deuteronomy we read:

If any man takes a wife and goes in to her and then turns against her, and charges her with shameful deeds and publicly defames her, and says, 'I took this woman, but when I came near her, I did not find her a virgin (Deuteronomy 22:13-14).

Note these two passages in Deuteronomy show three similarities:

1. A man takes a wife.

2. He marries and goes into her (that is initiates or has sexual intercourse).

3. He *finds* something in her which gives him cause to reject her.

In Deuteronomy 22 he *finds* her not to be a virgin. That is, on initiating sexual intercourse he has found her hymen not intact. She is accused of committing fornication and if proven, according to the Law of Moses, was to be stoned to death.

In Deuteronomy 24 he *finds* indecency (something of a sexual nature).

Therefore I believe the conversation between Jesus and the Pharisees was based on the interpretation of these two passages. The Pharisees basis for divorce came from Deuteronomy 24 and believed it justified divorce for any cause. Jesus however said there was only one cause: specifically the indecency of fornication committed by a betrothed wife based on Deuteronomy 22 and 24.

That Jesus was referring to Deuteronomy 22 is supported by another term Jesus used in Matthew 5:32. Literally it says: 'except for *word* (Gk: *logou*) of fornication (Gk: *porneia*)'. In Deuteronomy 22:14, a literal rendering of the Hebrew is: 'and makes accusing *words* against her'. The Greek Septuagint uses the word *logous* – the same as in Matthew 5:32.

In view of the above, the meaning of the exception becomes clear. A young woman betrothed to a man was considered his wife (literally: his woman; Deuteronomy 22:23-24), even though the marriage ceremony had not taken place and been consummated in sexual union. It was a binding covenant which could only be broken in two circumstances. Under the Law, God made the 'one flesh' principle a serious matter. A husband who, at the beginning of marriage found his bride was not a virgin, could charge her with fornication. The Hebrew and Greek words for fornication (the sin of the unfaithful betrothed woman) are *zanah* and *porneia* respectively, which refer to sex with or by an unmarried woman (see next section 'What Does *porneia* Mean?'). The Law required, on the basis of witnesses (Deuteronomy 19:15) or evidence as described previously, that a woman who had been sexually unfaithful before marriage be stoned to death (Deuteronomy 22:13-21).

Some have therefore argued that the exception Jesus gave for *porneia* cannot mean betrothal unfaithfulness because stoning to death was required, not divorce. Yet we have three examples in

Scripture where the death penalty was not applied as required by the Law of Moses for adultery and betrothal unfaithfulness. 1. King David's adultery with Bathsheba (2 Samuel 3:3-4). 2. the woman caught in adultery (John 8:3-11) and 3. Mary's supposed betrothal unfaithfulness as recorded by Matthew:

Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit and her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly (Matthew 1:18-19 ESV).

Joseph, after learning of Mary, his betrothed wife's pregnancy and believing she had been unfaithful to him, sought to *divorce* (the same word Jesus uses in his teaching on marriage and divorce) her but after being told the truth by an angel in a dream took Mary to be his wife.

So we can see the death penalty was not necessarily applied in every case of suspected premarital unfaithfulness (or adultery) but rather divorce.

The other circumstance whereby a betrothal was broken was, of course, by the death of one of the couple.

So to summarise: there was only one exception to Jesus' rule that a man could not divorce his wife. If he, before or at the very beginning of marriage, could prove his wife had been unfaithful (committed fornication – *porneia*) *before* marriage, he could (but not necessarily had to) divorce her (as Joseph intended to Mary) because she had already become one flesh with another man. Then if he married another he did not commit adultery. This explains why Matthew (who wrote for Jewish believers) alone recorded an exception to divorce since betrothal was a Jewish practice governed

by the Law of Moses. It should be noted also that Matthew alone gives the one example of a rightful divorce: that of Joseph and Mary because of her supposed unfaithfulness before marriage.

Why Mark's Account Differs From Matthew's

Now Mark also recorded the same encounter of Jesus with the Pharisees as Matthew but there are three significant differences.

1. Matthew recorded the Pharisees' question as: "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife *for any cause*?" Matthew goes on to record Jesus' answer to this question, giving one cause for divorce - fornication (*porneia*). Mark, however, omits '*for any cause*'.

2. Mark also omits Jesus' reply to the Pharisees containing the phrase '*except for fornication*'. These two omissions by Mark, I believe are not incidental but intentional. He omitted this one cause or exception for divorce – fornication (in this context betrothal sexual unfaithfulness) because it was not relevant to his intended readers – Romans and Greeks.

3. Matthew's account does not include Jesus' comments to His disciples after the debate with the Pharisees (Mark 10:10-12) recorded by Mark in which He teaches *no exception* and *adds* the circumstance of a woman divorcing her husband. There was no provision under the Law of Moses for a woman to divorce her husband. However under Roman and Greek law a woman could divorce her husband.

These three differences are consistent with the understanding Matthew originally wrote to Jews while Mark wrote to Romans and Greeks. Luke and Paul (who wrote to non-Jews) also make no reference to the exception.

Therefore the different accounts were written intentionally, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, because they were intended for different recipients. The exception to divorce, as recorded by Matthew, applied to the Jewish practice of betrothal. A man was not bound to consummate a marriage and could divorce his betrothed if she had been sexually unfaithful. Jesus' teaching in Mark and Luke and Paul's teaching are in harmony with Jesus' teaching in Matthew once we understand the reason for the differences.

This next chapter will examine the meaning of *porneia* as it is used in the New Testament and from other sources. I hope to show that its meaning, in context, is consistent with the above understanding of '*except for porneia'*.

What Does *porneia* Mean?

The prevailing view that divorce and remarriage is permissible largely depends on the idea that the Greek word *porneia* in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 means sexual sin in general including adultery. However when we examine its use in the New Testament and its Hebrew equivalent in the Old Testament we find it doesn't refer to sexual sin in general but to a sexual relationship with or by an unmarried woman. The closest English translation of the word *porneia* is in fact *fornication* which was the word used in most English translations up until the early 20th century.

A correct understanding of the meaning of a word from another language is gained through examining the word's use in its context. What follows is fairly lengthy, but I believe is necessary to gain a true understanding of the word *porneia* and the exception for divorce in Matthew.

Greek Lexicons

A number of Greek lexicons of recent times give *porneia* the meaning of sexual sin in general. But others give a specific meaning of unmarried sexual sin or prostitution. Therefore I believe it is best to learn the meaning from its context in scripture.

Porneia in the New Testament

1. *Porneia* is a noun based upon another Greek word *porne* meaning a harlot or prostitute who inevitably was an unmarried woman. Two other Greek words having the same root – *porneuo*, a verb, and *pornos*, a noun, are used in the New Testament.

2. It is distinct from adultery (Greek *moichiea*) since *porneia* is listed with other sins including adultery:

*For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications (*Gk: porneia*) thefts, false witness, slanders* (Matthew 15:19 and the parallel passage in Mark 7:21).

Matthew uses the word *porneia* only three times (5:32, 15:19 and 19:9) and each time it occurs with *moicheia*. In 15:19 the two words are placed next to each other in a list of sins which proceed out of the heart. Here the two words cannot mean the same thing and meant to convey distinct types of sin (as also in Mark 7:21).

And in two other passages we find the two words 'fornicators' (Gk: *pornos*) and 'adulterers' used together (and therefore cannot have the same meaning):

*Do not be deceived; neither fornicators (*Gk: pornos*), nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals ...* (1 Corinthians 6:9).

*Marriage is to be held in honour among all, and the marriage bed is to be undefiled; for fornicators (*Gk: pornos*) and adulterers God will judge* (Hebrews 13:4).

3. Where the context is clear, it refers to sex with a prostitute or an unmarried woman.

In 1 Corinthians 6:15-7:2, Paul uses three words all related to the same sexual sin – *porne*, *porneia* and *porneuo*. From the context, Paul is not referring to sexual sin from within marriage but outside:

*Now concerning the things about which you wrote, it is good for a man not to touch a woman. But because of immoralities (*Gk:

porneia*), each man is to have his own wife, and each woman is to have her own husband* (1 Corinthians 7:1-2).

Marriage is seen as an answer to the temptation of premarital sexual sin, *porneia*. This has been the understanding of this verse through church history.

In Acts fornication - *porneia* - is one of a number of sins the Gentile Christians were told to avoid:

But concerning the Gentiles who have believed, we wrote, having decided that they should abstain from meat sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication (Acts 21:25).

While here the meaning of *porneia* is not immediately clear it should be seen this is referring to sex with a prostitute or unmarried woman as this was acceptable in Roman and Greek culture. But adultery - sex with another man's wife - has always been a moral offence (and in many societies throughout history, punishable). This is also the standard in today's society - where sex between unmarried people is acceptable, but not adultery.

Sexual purity for Christians meant abstaining from *porneia* - fornication, not just adultery.

4. While adultery is sin against your *spouse* (Mark 10:11), *porneia* is said to be sin against your own *body* (1 Corinthians 6:18). This makes another distinction of the two words.

Does *porneia* have other meanings?

Does *porneia* include other sexual sins such as adultery, incest, and homosexuality and not be restricted to unmarried sex? The

following scriptures are often quoted to support a broader meaning of *porneia*.

1. **As incest** (1 Corinthians 5:1): A man has entered into a sexual relationship with his father's wife.

While we don't know the exact circumstances it is possible the father had died, making her an unmarried woman. However it was still sinful to have a sexual relationship with your father's wife even if he had died (Leviticus 18:8). Perhaps this is why Paul uses the expression "*such fornication*" as if there was a greater sin in this case of fornication. However, we cannot use this one example to say fornication includes all types of incest.

In the Old Testament incest (a sexual relationship with a close relative) is never described as fornication (Heb: *zanah*) but rather as wickedness (Heb: *zimmah*) or confusion (Heb: *tebel*) i.e. a violation of natural or divine order and in the Greek Septuagint as *asebeo*, meaning ungodly or wicked (Leviticus 20:12). Such 'marriages' were unlawful and therefore the legal formality of divorce did not apply. It is therefore unlikely *porneia* (and the Hebrew equivalent *zanah*) includes incest as Jesus used the word in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9.

2. **As homosexuality** (Jude 1:7): The inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah were said to have given themselves over to fornication and had gone after strange flesh.

This refers to two sins, not one – fornication and the intention of the men of Sodom to have sex with angels. Homosexuality is not specifically mentioned (the Greek word for homosexuality is absent here). While it is true that some at least of the inhabitants of Sodom practised homosexuality we cannot be certain that they were exclusively so. Sodom was destroyed because of its many sins

(Ezekiel 16:49-50). Homosexuality has always grown out of a heterosexually corrupt society, like Sodom and Gomorrah, which had first given itself over to fornication (unmarried heterosexual sin). In two other passages of Scripture (1Corinthians 6:9 and 1Timothy 1:10) the Greek word for homosexuality (*arsenokoites*) is listed with the Greek word for fornicator (*pornos*) as separate sins. Therefore this verse in Jude cannot be taken to mean homosexuality is a type of fornication.

3. **As adultery** (Proverbs 7:10). An adulterous woman is said to be dressed as a harlot or prostitute (Hebrew *zanah*). However the verse does not say she *is* a prostitute.

Conclusion: In the New Testament, in the context of a man-woman relationship, there is no clear example of *porneia* being used to denote adultery. Therefore adultery (*moicheia*) is distinct from and not a type of fornication (*porneia*).

Use of *porneia* by the Early Church Fathers

The Early Church Fathers (such as Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Hermas and Theophilus) also understood *porneia* (fornication) and *moicheia* (adultery) as being different sins since they are frequently listed together with other sins.

In Justin Martyr's Dialogue with Trypho, the Nativity of Mary and the Gospel of Nicodemus, Mary's supposed sexual unfaithfulness while betrothed is referred to as fornication (*porneia*), not adultery (*moicheia*).

The use of *porneia* by the Early Church Fathers shows they understood that: 1. it was the sexual sin of unmarried people and: 2. it was not synonymous with adultery, the sexual sin of married people. This is consistent with its use in the New Testament.

The Hebrew Equivalent of *porneia*

It should be noted, that while Matthew wrote his gospel in Greek, he recorded the words of Jesus spoken in Hebrew (or Aramaic). So what would have been the Hebrew word translated as *porneia* in Greek? What we discover is significant: there is a Hebrew word which has a direct Greek equivalent to *porneia: – zanah*. This can be seen from Old Testament quotations in the New Testament and from the Septuagint (a Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament from the 3rd century BC). Searching the Hebrew Old Testament we find that *zanah*, in the context of a man-woman relationship, never means sexual sin generally and certainly not adultery. It either refers to an unmarried woman who engages in sexual intercourse or a woman (who inevitably would also have been unmarried) sells or prostitutes herself for a fee.

Old Testament Hebrew Use of the Equivalent Word To *porneia – zanah*

In the Hebrew Old Testament we can see the equivalent words used – z*anah* (a verb) meaning to commit harlotry or prostitution, *zanuwn* (a noun) meaning harlotry or prostitution and *zanuwth* (a noun) meaning a harlot or prostitute. They refer to sexual sin by or with an unmarried woman. For example:

Rahab the prostitute. Compare Joshua 6 (in Hebrew: *zanah*) with Hebrews 11:31 and James 2:25 (in Greek: *porne*).

While Israel remained at Shittim, the people began to play the harlot (zanah) *with the daughters of Moab* (Numbers 25:1).

Compare this to Revelation 2:14 where *porneuo* is used to describe the same sin (in this context Israel's unfaithfulness through idolatry).

Dinah, Jacob's unmarried daughter, was regarded as being treated like a harlot, in Hebrew *zanah* (Genesis 34:31).

Your daughters (unmarried) *when they play the harlot* (zanah) *and your brides* (married) *when they commit adultery* (Hosea 4:13-14).

Here in Hosea is a distinction between harlotry and adultery. In the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament from the 3rd century BC) the Hebrew verb for harlotry *zanah* is translated into the Greek verb *porneuo*.

In Deuteronomy 22:13-21 a woman who is found not to be a virgin at the time of marriage was regarded as a prostitute or harlot, having committed fornication, and was to be stoned to death. Again, in the Septuagint the Hebrew verb for harlotry *zanah* is translated into the Greek verb *porneuo*.

There are a number of references in the prophetical books which speak of Israel's unfaithfulness through idolatry (Hosea 2:2, Jeremiah 3:6-9, Ezekiel 16:28-38 & 23:43-45). Israel is said to have committed both the sin of fornication, *porneia* (as God's betrothed virgin) and adultery (as God's bride) by their worship of idols. Yet the two words have distinct meanings.

The meaning of *zanah* in contemporary Hebrew

Zanah in contemporary Hebrew is translated as ‘prostitution’.

The meaning of *porneia* in contemporary Greek

Porneia in contemporary Greek is translated as ‘prostitution, whoredom, harlotry or fornication’.

Christians and Divorce

The translation of *porneia* in Latin and English Bibles

1. Latin Vulgate

The Bible was translated into Latin by Jerome (405AD). Where *porneia* occurs it is consistently translated as '**fornication**', meaning sex with an unmarried woman or prostitution.

2. English Bibles

English bibles up to the early 20th century consistently translated *porneia* as fornication or whoredom (that is, harlotry or prostitution). Later Bible translations (especially those post World War 2) are not consistent (and also within the same translation), translating *porneia* as unchastity, unfaithfulness, sexual immorality, immorality, marital unfaithfulness and fornication.

The meaning of 'fornication' in English dictionaries

Robert Cawdrey (1604): uncleanness between single persons.

Samuel Johnson (1768): concubinage or commerce with an unmarried woman.

Webster (1954) as first definition: illicit sexual intercourse by unmarried persons, male or female.

Oxford Pocket (1969) as first definition: the voluntary sexual intercourse between a man and an unmarried woman.

The English word *fornication* is derived from the Latin word *fornix*, meaning a brothel and in its various forms means sexual intercourse with an unmarried woman (whether for pleasure or

profit). Its meaning is consistent with the Greek word *porne* and the Old Testament Hebrew word *zanah*- a harlot or prostitute.

Conclusion

In the context of a man-woman relationship, *porneia* in the New Testament and the equivalent word *zanah* or *zanuwn* in the Old Testament, refer to sexual intercourse with or by an unmarried woman or a prostitute. Whether it was for profit or pleasure is not the issue. While these words are also used metaphorically for idolatry and the unfaithfulness of God's people, it is their use in the context of a man-woman relationship that is relevant to understanding the exception in Matthew's gospel: where a woman, who is betrothed, has had sexual intercourse with another man prior to marriage. These words are consistently distinguished from adultery (Gk: *moicheia*) - sexual intercourse with a married woman (other than your wife).

We should note here that it is the *marital status of the woman*, not the man, which determines whether fornication or adultery has been committed. If a man, single or married has sex with an unmarried woman it is fornication, but with a married woman it is adultery.

The translation of *porneia* in contemporary Greek and *zanah* in Hebrew also bear the same meaning. Their translation as 'fornication' in Latin and English Bibles (up to the early 20th century) is also consistent with this meaning.

In other Greek literature *porneia* is sometimes used in the context of adultery, but this should not be the basis of deciding its meaning in the New Testament and in particular as Jesus used it (that is, *zanah* - the Hebrew equivalent of *porneia*).

There is no clear example of *porneia* in the Greek New Testament or its Hebrew equivalent, *zanah*, in the Old Testament meaning adultery or sexual sin in general. Therefore the permissive view that adultery or other sexual sin after marriage justifies divorce and remarriage is an assumption, not a clear Biblical teaching.

Yet even if it is believed this exception refers to sexual sin in general we are still faced with the fact Jesus said *whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery*, irrespective of her guilt or innocence. Why? Because a man who marries a divorced woman becomes a participant (though not intentionally) in adultery (Matthew 5:32 and Luke 16:18). Therefore separation may be justified but remarriage is not.

This was also the understanding of the early church of the first four centuries. Separation was permissible in certain circumstances, but marriage to another was not while the former partner was still alive. (William Heth and Gordon Wenham's book, *Jesus and Divorce,* gives a detailed analysis of Jesus' teaching and that of the early Church on divorce).

Yet the debate about divorce and the exception for *porneia* should never depend solely on the meaning of one word. There are other fundamental reasons why there is no right to divorce and remarry under the New Covenant. These are based on the basic principles of love and faithfulness that Jesus and Paul taught (as I have described in Part 1 - The Best Way) which must be considered first.

There are, however, two other commonly proposed grounds for divorce and subsequent remarriage - desertion and abuse. That is the subject of the next chapter.

Divorce for Desertion or Abuse?

Desertion

Yet if the unbelieving one leaves, let him leave; the brother or the sister is not under bondage in such [cases] but God has called us to peace (1 Corinthians 7.15).

According to this view the phrase 'not under bondage' or 'not bound' in this verse means the believing partner is no longer obligated to the marriage and free to remarry should they be deserted by an unbelieving spouse. Yet Paul does not say the believer is free to remarry. He simply says the believer is not obligated to remain with the unbeliever if they leave -'*let him leave'*. When the unbelieving spouse is antagonistic or even violent (which often happens in Islamic and Hindu societies) such separation can bring peace for the believer.

Yet to say 'not bound' or 'not under bondage' means 'not bound to the marriage and free to remarry' is an assumption. And an assumption in this case is effectively adding to God's word. Furthermore, the Greek word Paul uses here for ‘bound’ or ‘bondage’ (*douloo*) is not the same word he uses for the bond of marriage (*deo*) in Romans 7.2 and 1 Corinthians 7.39.

There are other problems with the desertion exception view. First, it goes against the one exception Jesus taught and secondly clearly contradicts what Paul had previously stated that a man must not divorce his wife and a wife is not to leave her husband or if she does, remain unmarried (vs. 10-11). Secondly it makes a distinction which God has not made: that a marriage to an unbeliever is broken by desertion while a marriage to a believer is not. God says a woman is bound to her husband as long as he lives - not just as

long as he lives with her (Romans 7.2 and 1 Corinthians 7.39). Paul's teaching is therefore not an addition to Jesus' teaching on marriage and divorce.

Abuse

Husbands are called by God to love, cherish and honour their wives. A husband who abuses his wife for whatever reason is committing a gross sin. A wife in such situations should not be expected to put up with abuse through misguided counsel to submit and forgive, for she has a God-given responsibility to care for her own body and mind (and that of her children). A wife should not willingly submit to what is clearly sinful.

This is what I believe should be the scriptural course of action (based on Matthew 18:15-17; James 5:19-20):

1. Confront her husband with his sin, speaking the truth in love. Such a man is in danger of hell (Matthew 5:30) and needs to know the fear of God. This will not be easy, but it needs to be done.

2. If she cannot or he fails to acknowledge his sin and repent then get mature men in the church to speak to the husband, calling him without compromise to repent. If he still does not repent the church members should be informed and he be disciplined according to Scripture (Matthew 18:15-17; 1 Corinthians 5:1-13; 1 Timothy 5:20). If a church won't do this and care for the abused wife they are sinning against God too.

3. If there is still no repentance then the wife's only recourse may be to separate from her husband. Yet she must remain unmarried, that is, in such situations there can be no remarriage (to another man) (1 Corinthians 7:11). Her church members should be prepared to provide such a wife with accommodation and loving support.

In recent times another teaching has appeared which says that abuse is *constructive* desertion. That is, because the husband is abusing his wife he has negated his responsibility to love and care for her and so, in effect, has deserted her. It is true the husband has negated his responsibility to his wife but it is a distortion of the truth and scripture to equate it with desertion. They are two separate sins and should not be confused. In either case, as explained previously, there may be circumstances where separation is warranted, but not remarriage.

Conclusion

The widely held view that divorce and remarriage are permissible on the grounds of sexual unfaithfulness or desertion, while understandable just from a human perspective, is not consistent with the whole counsel of God and especially the teaching of Jesus and Paul.

Firstly it is inconsistent with what Jesus and Paul taught about love and faithfulness which bear all things and never end. Secondly, the prevailing view that the one exception for divorce as recorded by Matthew justifies divorce and remarriage is based on a number of assumptions, none of which can be satisfactorily upheld. This view effectively undermines the sanctity of marriage by making love and faithfulness conditional.

The exception for divorce in Matthew only applied to the circumstance of betrothal unfaithfulness where a woman has been sexually unfaithful before marriage.

Understandably to live by the standard that I believe Jesus taught about marriage is not easy, but is possible by the grace and power that God willingly supplies (2 Peter 1:2-4). When we truly know God's love we can also love others as He loves us. Therefore to remain faithful and possibly be single is not unreasonable or a burden too great to bear for what God has asked of us, He also gives the grace and strength to do.

Resources

These resources are suggested for their encouragement to uphold Christian marriage as Jesus taught it.

Articles

Andrews, J. *Divorce and Remarriage: A Working Paper*

http://www.lumpofclay.net/remarriage.htm

Alan Bailey, *The Role of a Christian Man*. Though written over 30 years ago is particularly relevant, and perhaps more so today.

Piper, John. *Divorce and Remarriage: A Position Paper*

http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/divorce-remarriage-a-position-paper

(Piper's series 'Marriage Christ and Covenant-One Flesh for the Glory of God' is also highly recommended)

Tragically Widening the Grounds of Legitimate Divorce

http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/tragically-widening-the-grounds-of-legitimate-divorce

Rudvin, Arne. *What Jesus Said About Divorce and Remarriage*

http://www.marriagedivorce.com/What-Jesus-Said-About-Divorce-and-Remarriage.pdf

Books

On Marriage, Reconciliation, Divorce and Remarriage:

Chapman, Gary. *Hope For The Separated*

Cornes, Andrew. *Divorce and Remarriage: Biblical Principles and Pastoral Practice*

Heth, William and Wenham, Gordon. *Jesus and Divorce* (This book examines the teaching of the early church fathers: that while divorce or separation was permitted for adultery, remarriage was not while the former spouse lived).

Hughes, Selwyn. *Marriage As God Intended* (I recommend this in particular)

Harvey, Dave. *When Sinners Say I Do*

Pawson, David. *Remarriage Is Adultery Unless...*

Thomas, Gary. *Sacred Marriage*

Wingerd D., Elliff, J., Chrisman, J., Burchett, S. *Divorce & Remarriage: A Permanence View*

Audio and Video

Cornes, Andrew. *Divorce and Remarriage* (audio) *Part 1: Biblical Principles*

http://www.christian.org.uk/resource/biblical-principles

Part 2: Pastoral Principles

http://www.christian.org.uk/resource/pastoral-principles

Pawson, David. (video) *Divorce and Remarriage*

http://davidpawson.org/resources/resource/1187

Contact: peter@christiansanddivorce.com